

Making an Obama Presidency a Success

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I don't like to talk about no-hitters in the 8th inning, but with less than four weeks until Election Day, it certainly looks like, barring any dramatic turnarounds, Barack Obama will win this election. While that news should not surprise anybody, it is worth beginning to think about how to make this a more meaningful victory for progressives and a more enduring one for the Democratic Party.

Most of the time when the presidency switches parties, it is because the incumbent party is perceived as having failed. In recent years this has clearly been the case in 1976, 1980 and 1992. The reasons for the Republican victories in the extremely close races of 1968 and 2000 cannot be attributed entirely to the failings of incumbent Presidents Johnson and Clinton, particularly as Clinton was still quite popular in 2000. In 2008, an Obama victory would be impressive and historic, but would also be attributable, to a great extent, to public anger and frustration with the current Republican administration.

An Obama presidency will, almost no matter what, be a welcome relief and major improvement on the current administration. The impact of that alone should not be understated. If, however, Obama is a four year interlude between Republican administrations like Carter was, or if, like Clinton, he fails to pass any major legislation or build the party, Obama will have been a disappointment. Moreover, a truly successful Obama administration will not only succeed legislatively, but strengthen the Democratic Party moving forward.

These two goals are obviously closely linked. The failure of either Clinton or Carter to succeed in their legislative agendas contributed to costly Democratic defeats in 1994 and 1980. Like all of the last four Democratic presidents, Obama can expect to have a Democratic majority in both houses when he begins his term, but even though this is a Democratic year, it is unlikely his majority will approach the size of the Democratic majorities enjoyed by Presidents Carter, Johnson, or perhaps even Clinton, when they first took office. Carter and Johnson were elected with a Senate that was more than 60% Democratic and a House of Representatives where the Democrats controlled more than two thirds of the seat. Clinton had smaller but still substantial Democratic majorities in 1993 when his party had 57 Senate seats and a margin of more than 80 seats in the House.

Two other recent presidencies, those of Johnson and Reagan, can be very instructive for a new Obama administration, with regards to approaching new legislation. Ironically, during the primary, Obama got into a spat with Hillary Clinton because he suggested, rather obviously, that Ronald Reagan had "changed the country more than Bill Clinton. Clinton in turn, got herself in trouble by making the equally apparent point that President Lyndon Johnson, through his mastery of the legislative process, was able to accomplish things that Dr. Martin Luther King was not able to do from outside the government.

Johnson and Reagan were perhaps the two most successful presidents of the postwar period in terms of passing legislation. They both passed much of their legislation in their first two years in office. Both recognized that the circumstances of their first term in office, in Johnson's case the strong Democratic majorities and in Reagan's case the weak Democratic majorities and his own resounding victory in 1980, gave them an opportunity and political capital that was not going to last their entire term. So they spent that capital pushing through legislation that was important to them.

Johnson and Reagan both suffered big losses for their party during their first midterm election, as the Democrats lost four seats in the senate and 47 in the house in 1966 while the Republicans lost 26 house seats in 1982. These electoral losses may have been the inevitable price for Johnson successfully pushing through Medicare, Medicaid and the Voting Rights act and for Reagan's Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. Importantly, Clinton after a relatively unsuccessful first two years in office did even worse losing control of both houses of congress in 1994. The lesson here for Obama is to act decisively and not to be afraid to risk the big majorities he is likely to get in this election, as his party will probably lose some seats anyway in 2010.

In addition to needing to aggressively and competently pass as much of his legislative agenda in his first two years in office as possible, Obama has to be different from other recent Democratic presidents as well. It is essential that an Obama presidency stand for something that can be an organizing principle for the Democratic Party in the next years or decades. In this respect, the most useful model, with apologies to the Clintons, is Ronald Reagan. Reagan's commitment, sometimes honored in the breach, to low taxes, strong defense and social conservatism formed the Republican Party platform for a generation, and a successful one at that. In a previous generation, Roosevelt similarly set goals, albeit very different ones, that were the foundation for the Democratic Party for several decades. Neither Carter or Clinton were able to do a similar thing with their presidency. Clinton was able to get reelected, and was a good president, but the successes of his presidency were stewardship of the economy and individual foreign policy decisions, rather than any big picture program or ideals.

Obama might choose real commitment to a new energy policy, a more multi-lateral approach to foreign policy, more rational economic thinking, or other things, but it is essential that he choose a few big picture ideals and unite the party behind them, and support these ideals with substantive accomplishments.

Lastly, Obama needs to continue to expand the electoral map. In the last few election cycles, Democrats have won in places which 10 or 20 years ago were viewed as lost to the Democrats. Making the gains in the western states and the northern states of the southeast more enduring would give the Democratic Party an enormous boost nationally. In order to do this, Obama will have to offer an administration that appeals to Latinos in the Southwest, western voters and lower income rural white voters in places like Virginia and North Carolina. These political considerations should inform Obama's administration's priorities as well as his efforts to set new goals and direction for the Democratic Party.